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ABSTRACT

According to "Time Magazine," "by 2056...the 'average' U.S. resident...will trace his/her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia--almost anywhere but white Europe." Unfortunately multiculturalism has often been the focus of discussions concerning the problems it causes rather than the number of possibilities for enrichment that such diversity promises. Multicultural literature provides students from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and racial groups with a center to build upon, enriching and inspiring their own experiences. The most commonly acknowledged reason for incorporating multicultural literature into the mainstream is its social significance: students experience vicariously the lives of others and thus learn more about the world. An even more important reason is that students should not be deprived of great works of art. For these and other reasons this literature should not be ghettoized. African American literature should not be confined to February's Black History Month, or Latin Literature to "La Raza" week. Examples of titles, class projects, and successful programs demonstrate how multicultural literature can be incorporated into the mainstream of what is being taught. (NH)

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DESTROYING THE STEREOTYPES:

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

FOR STUDENTS IN THE MAINSTREAM

Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (82nd, Louisville, KY, November 18-23, 1992).

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My topic--teaching multicultural literature--why, how, and for whom--should not even be a topic for discussion. It is obvious to me, many of my colleagues, and lots of my friends and former students, that including multicultural literature into our English courses is a given. However, when we look at the country's changing demographics, and then compare it with the existing canon, examine censorship in the schools, and look at what we're missing as a result, the issue of expanding our programs to include multicultural literature becomes an important one.

What I'd like to do then, is to quickly provide a profile of America's student body, define our term "multicultural," look at what we're offering our students in our literature classes throughout the country, touch on why it's so exclusive of multicultural work, and then mention some titles, projects, and successful programs that I and some of my former students have been involved in in our own classrooms.

Changing Demographics

According to Ken Zeichner from the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, by the year 2020, 40% of the nation's school age youth will be children of color although we are seeing little if any increase in the number of nonmainstream teachers coming into the field (1992). Hmong Americans, though virtually non-existent two decades ago, have grown to over 100,000 and have significant populations in several urban areas throughout the United

States (Walker-Moffat, 1992). *Time Magazine's* William Henry (1991) tells us that "by 2056...the 'average' U.S. resident...will trace his/her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia--almost anywhere but white Europe."

A break-down of the various groups in the United States in the nineties is a fascinating study, from an historical point of view, from the perspectives of art, music, philosophy, science and many other areas of academe. Unfortunately, we often focus on the *problems* that multiculturalism has caused instead of celebrating the number of possibilities for enrichment that such diversity promises (*EJ Forum,* 1990). Our schools should reflect the exceptional advantages Americans have by continually revitalizing our principles and goals and values. Students from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and racial groups should find school a center for building upon, enriching and inspiring their own experiences. In fact, as I said earlier, a presentation like this should never need to be made. So...why are we here...?

The Literature We Teach

In a recent study of secondary schools, the National Center on Literature Teaching and Learning has determined:

> Of the 11,579 individual selections reported in the public school sample...81% were by male authors, 98% by white (non-Hispanic) authors, and 99% were written within the United States (63%), United Kingdom (28%), or Western European (8%) tradition....In spite of efforts to broaden the canon over the past several decades, the study found only

> marginal increases in the percentage of selections written by women (from 17% in 1963 to 19% in 19488) or by writers from alternative cultural traditions (from 0.6% to 2%). (Applebee, 1992, 27-8).

Analyzing anthologies of United States literature from five major publishers, Pace (1992) found the selections

> ...unfortunately...not a chorus of multicultural voices. Of the 98 writers represented in the textbook canon, 65 are white men, 16 are white women, and 10 are black men. There are only four black women, and the two native Americans and single Chicano are males. There are no Asian American. (33)

Definition of Multicultural

Therefore, though we're all probably here because we believe in teaching multicultural literature...there are lots of people out there who do not.

Defining Multicultural

Before touching on why we do not use more multicultural literature, I'd like to define my meaning of the term. The term "multicultural" is very broad. It means a number of things to a number of people. It means multiethnic to many. That is, multicultural includes African American, Mexican American, Native American, and so on. But that is only a large sub-set of what multiethnic really is. There is also Italian American, Jewish American, Polish American, and on and on.

Besides ethnic differences, we need also to include the various other nonmainstream groups in this culture. We must mention "female" in our definition of multicultural since most of the literature we teach is written by males. We must include gay American, homeless American, disabled American. In a country where 1 out of every 5 children lives below the poverty line, where half of our children are from single-parent families, where huge numbers have been raised in abusive situations, I believe we need to consider the term non-mainstream in a much broader sense to include any group that has the characteristic of "otherness." Thus when we consider literature whose characters our students can either identify with or experience vicariously from, we should take into account all groups who have been marginalized...in any way and for any reason. At least that is what *I* feel we must do.

Censorship

But when we look again at the paucity of multicultural literature, we need next to examine the issue of censorship as it has engulfed many classrooms all over the country. Although censorship is certainly a topic which merits its own attention, I'll simply touch on it here because of its relevance to our discussion. And to do this, I'll use Julian Thompson's theory on censorship in an *ALAN Review* where his "big three plus one" concept pretty much sums it up. According to Thompson (1991), literature is censored in our schools because of its vulgar language, sexual activity or anti-establishment attitudes. I agree with this description. Thompson goes on, however, to add the "plus one" part of his formula which

has to do with the self-censorship imposed by teachers who, because of a variety of reasons, do not select materials which they fear will cause them problems.

If we superimpose multicultural literature onto this already difficult situation, we see a number of problems which will arise. I have seen many a multiethnic title passed over because of "language unbefitting to our students." More likely, curriculum coordinators and teachers use "objectionable language" as an excuse not to have to deal with some uncomfortable issues.

While teaching Richard Wright's *Black Boy* during my first year, I was confronted with a nasty parental complaint . The lesson I learned was to think carefully before I selected literature which would get me into trouble. Self-censorship is subtle, easy to do, and something we do not ordinarily think of or deal with consciously--or at least we need to monitor our colleagues for self-censoring a lot of quality literature which might bring about some conflict.

Why Teach Multicultural Literature?

Before giving some examples of incorporating multicultural literature into the mainstream, I'd like to point out two reasons for expanding our canon to include multicultural literature---not one. The most commonly acknowledged reason is the one that people outside our field usually give for including nonmainstream works. And that is that there is some social significance for our students. And I do not disagree with this belief. Certainly all of us include in

our objectives for teaching literature that we want our students to identify with the characters they read and/or we want them to experience vicariously the lives of the people they read about. We hope through these experiences that our students will gain an awareness and understanding of themselves and others and thus will learn more about their world.

But what for me is an even more important reason for including multicultural literature is that to exclude it, we're depriving our students of some great works of art! To exclude Toni Morrison, Joy Kagawa, James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Silko, et al. is depriving our students of some of the finest literature available. And this is the issue we must deal with in working toward expanding the canon.

And one more thing...this literature we speak of should not be ghettoized...we should not confine African American literature to February's Black History Month...or Latino literature to "La Raza" week. We must incorporate these literary pieces throughout our courses into the mainstream of what we teach. We can, as Moss (1992) suggests, teach Virginia Hamilton's Drear mysteries with Faulkner and Poe. Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* might be used in conjunction with Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in an examination of marriage and male/female relationships. When studying "coming of age" novels, one might consider *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* along with the traditional *Great Expectations.* The immigrant experience could connect *The Great Gatsby* to *America Is in the Heart.*

I once taught a freshman "honors" class called "Diversity and the American Dream." The focus for this class then ***was*** on diversity and thus the literature of any nonmainstream groups. Students selected topics based on suggestions provided by me, the librarian, and several provocative essays from our reading collection. Some found specific authors, others picked groups. Student choices varied: Asian-American Writers, Chinese-American Writers, Japanese-American Writers, Soviet Dissidents and Soviet Jews, The Homeless, Chicana/o Literature, American Indian Women, Native American Literatures, The Ojibwa, Nineteenth Century Immigrant Women, African American Women, The Black Experience in the Changing South 1940-69, Black Writers of the Depression, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright.

At the end of the quarter, students presented their research and literary analyses, far surpassing my expectations. Those who worked on women's literature traced oppression through the eyes of women using Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Ignatia Broker's *Night Flying Woman*, and Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*. Treating the nineteenth century immigrant experience, they presented Rose Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*, Gro Svendsen's *Frontier Mother*, and Marie Hall Ets' *Rosa*. Finally, identifying women out-of-the-mainstream, they presented Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and the collected works of these latter two writers.

The group which centered around the lives and literatures of African-Americans picked as their theme "Methods of Survival of African-Americans." This group pointed out the earlier efforts to fight discrimination through communism, using W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright, the Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, the religious teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the struggles of Malcolm X, contrasting the beliefs, intellectual development and successes of all these twentieth century figures.

The group loosely connected around the topic of Asian Americans provided, in many ways, the most diverse group both chronologically and geographically. Drawing from the histories and writings of several Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Southeast-Asian authors, this group treated the class to discussions of such books as *Aiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Chin, Frank, et al., Eds.), Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Jeanne Wakatsuki-Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, Yo-Shiko Uchida's *Desert Exile*, Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, Joy Kagawa's *Obasan* (Canadian), *Woman in the Woods*, and *Choice of Dreams*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, and Maureen Wartski's *A Boat to Nowhere*. Rounding out this group was my "resistant dissident" reporting on Soviet writers using Elena Bonner's *Alone Together*, Andrei Sakharov's *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*, Alexander Solzheinitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and Anatoly and Avital Shcharansky's *The Journey Home*.

By far the toughest assignment, or so I thought, was given to a group consisting of one student who chose to look at the military history of the Lakota land his grandfather had claimed (reading John Niehardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, Paul Radin's edited collection *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and Nancy Wood's edited collection *War Cry on a Prayer Feather*). The student studying the American Indians of the northern midwest provided a three page bibliography including all of Louise Erdrich's work, Ignatia Broker's *Night Flying Woman*, Jim Northrup's prose collection, and numerous Ojibwa poems, short stories and historical documents. Chicano/a literature included Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, poetry of Gary Soto, and Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*. The plight of the homeless was identified through Jonathan Kozol's *Rachel and Her Children, Out of the Rain* (a collection of poetry written by members of a San Francisco homeless shelter), and the Steinbeck classic *The Grapes of Wrath*. After much thought, this group chose as their theme "The suffering, pain and indignation of certain groups can never be fully understood by people of privilege."

How close did I come to achieving my goals? I used several criteria to measure the results of this experiment. First, students read far more, used wider and more varied resources, and secured much more assistance from library staff than I expected they would. In their evaluations, most of the students expressed their surprise and enthusiasm for conducting their own research. Many said they felt much more comfortable now when they worked on their own.

One student began her presentation on African-American women by telling us...

> ...when I first started this project...I'm embarrassed to say...that I thought it wasn't going to be worth my time...that the literature of uneducated Black women would not have much to say to me. How wrong I was! The reading I've done has allowed me into their lives and I'm much the better person for it. These women have endured and overcome far more than any of us will ever experience.

Another student shared that she was glad to have chosen American Indian women, commenting, "They write so well. They really have a lot to say." Another class member quickly corrected her, pointing out that her surprise displayed some residual stereotyping to which the first speaker uneasily agreed. (We still have work to do!)

In their class evaluations, students commented:

> --This class has opened my mind to different people's cultures. Living in Central Minnesota makes it difficult to experience cultural diversity.
>
> --very beneficial...I learned much about my topic...and through others' presentations, an overview of the real American society...everyone should be exposed to this material.
>
> --We incorporated the research with the literature in an interesting and informative manner...I learned a lot about our society and reasons for discrimination and

prejudice. It helped me look at literature I would otherwise not have known.

--I learned about minority groups through our readings and our individual research projects. I enjoyed the literature read and feel closer to my subject. I feel that some of my racial prejudice disappeared.

Only one student took exception to the "freedom of thought" we tried to practice in class.

--I did learn some new perspectives towards minority groups, but I didn't like the ideas that were seemingly forced on me when the class discussed homosexuals. This is a personal issue and views depend on personal background, religion, etc. I feel strongly about this and did not appreciate being told my views were wrong because they are not.

I regret that I did not detect this hostility during our discussion and deal with it more successfully.

On the face of it, students accomplished much more than I had anticipated. I recommend this approach as a step toward increasing students' awareness of our diverse population and developing their interest in an expanding literary canon. In all the years I have taught, I have seldom reaped the generous rewards I received from this course.

If we give students the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of others, we are giving them a look at the American dream from everyone's point-of-view. In our efforts to expand the literary canon to provide a more realistic look at what American writers

have to say, we discover for our students--and for ourselves---a vastly unappreciated yet wonderfully broad-based literature that, heretofore, many never knew existed.

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